Media Reviews

Digitisation, Big Data, and the Future of the Medical Humanities

Introduction

Digital worlds are producing ever-increasing amounts of information across databases and such born-digital resources as blogs, websites, social media and digitised physical materials. Such 'big data' joins a longstanding world that is deeply rich with a variety of persistent material objects that contain records of the human condition and the human past. As these analogue and virtual worlds collide and co-exist, opportunities abound for scholars to advance interdisciplinary collaborations and expand co-operation throughout institutions and organisations that preserve history and support historical research.

On 1 May 2015, in a panel at the annual meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine, scholars from the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as leaders of the Wellcome Trust and the National Library of Medicine's History of Medicine Division, addressed key philosophical and practical issues impacting the application of digital humanities techniques to the history of medicine. Offering perspectives practised by institutions that are producing digitised and born-digital resources, and from individuals who are using them, this panel engaged audiences associated with both enterprises and challenged them with a wide and sustained reflection on the processes of digitisation and the meaning of 'big data' for the future of the medical humanities.

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Why Creating a Digital Library for the History of Medicine is Harder than You'd Think!

It has never been easier for a historian of medicine to access medical books and journals. There are very few journals nowadays, especially in medicine and bioscience, that rely solely on paper as a medium for publishing. With books, the transition to digital has been slower but is gathering pace. Digitisation has also opened up access to historical collections. Of course, this process is far from complete, despite the stated ambitions of organisations such as Google, and this in turn creates challenges for the generation of students who cannot conceive of texts that exist only in a physical world (especially one as remote and alien as a research library). Nonetheless, the rapid growth of digital access does present huge opportunities for the researcher. These range from the simple – the ability to find or check a reference online, or to run a free text search across large bodies of material – to the more complex, such as image matching or pattern recognition, the extraction